

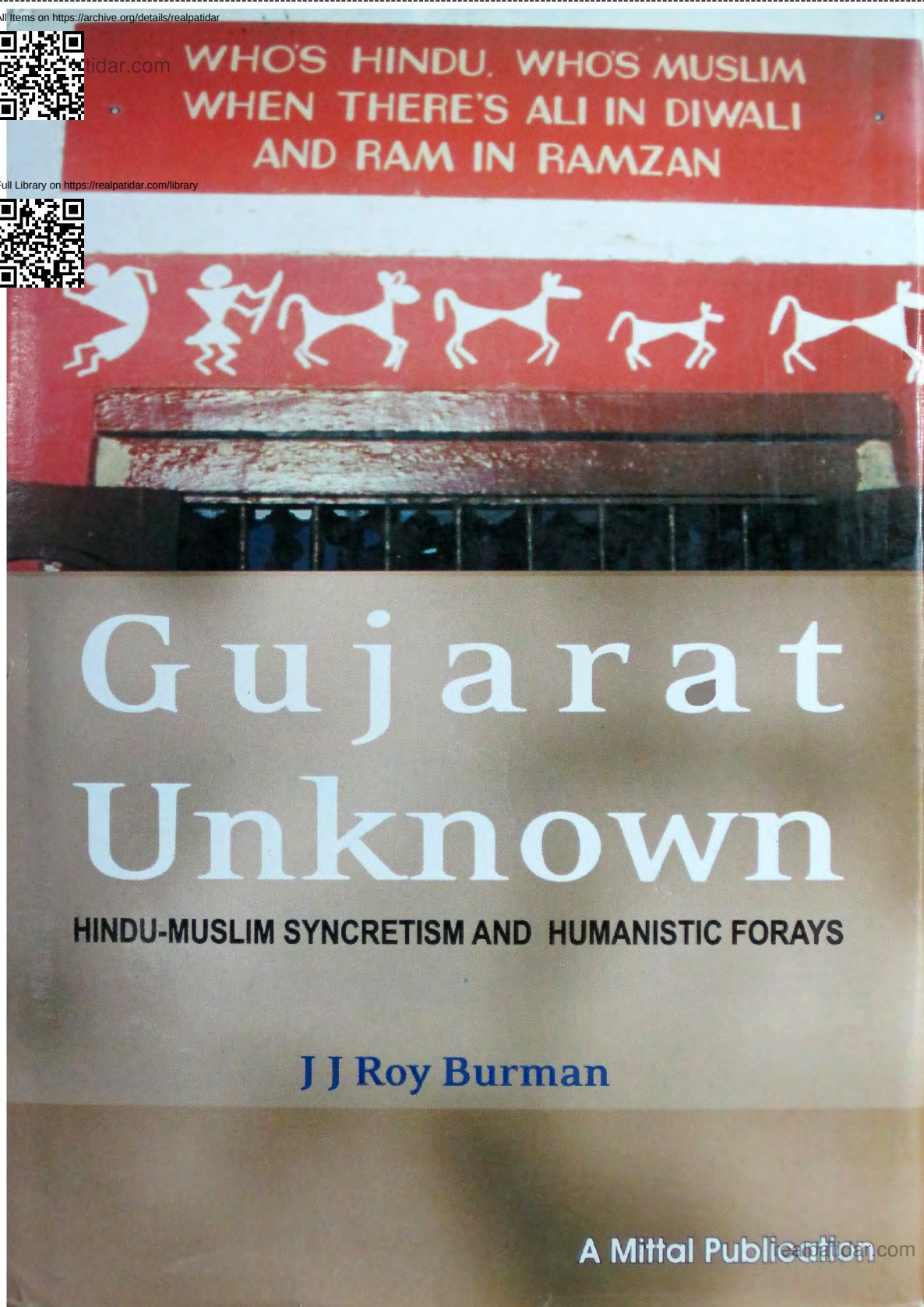


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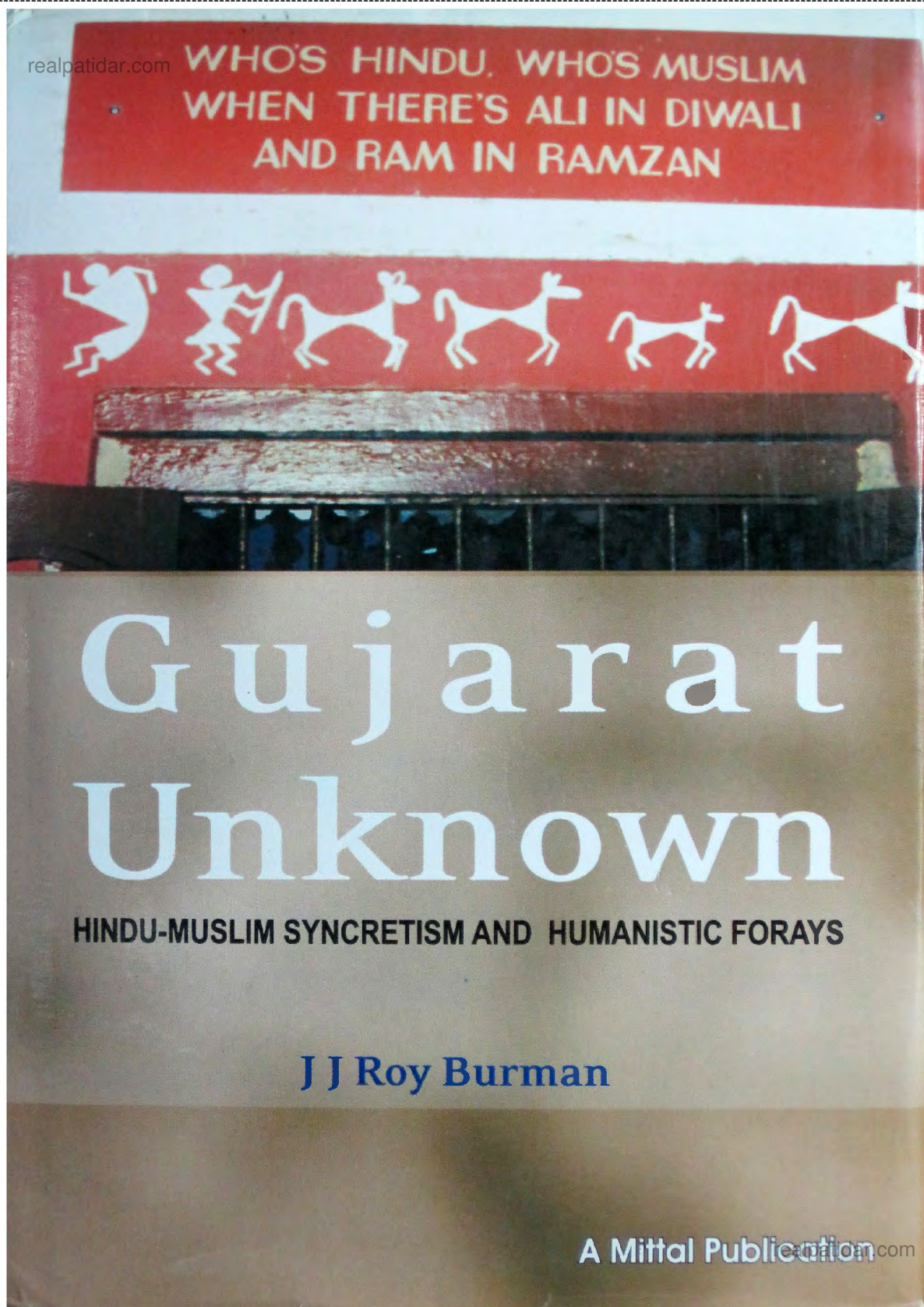
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Gujarat is a land of paradoxes. On the one hand it has produced luminaries like Akho, Sayaji Rao Gaekwad and Gandhi who tirelessly worked for the upliftment of the society and to promote peace and amity among people of all faiths; on the other, it has drawn worldwide attention for the repeated communal pogroms between Hindus and Muslims. The riots after the Godhra incident in 2002 were perhaps the most widespread and virulent. This has led many scholars, activists and NGOs to record and trace the scale and nature of violence—to provide a Geography of Violence. An extensive study undertaken in different parts of Gujarat after two years of the pogrom, however, indicated that the aftermath was mainly confined to the central part of the state. In other areas there were only few skirmishes.

There are thousands of *dargahs* and *mazars* in the state which are frequented both by Hindus and Muslims. Only some prominent *dargahs* with high financial turnovers were a bit affected. In fact at one village in Kutch district, a Bajrang Dal activist was found expanding the shrine through public contribution. In this book several syncretic shrines have been documented along with portrayal of many communities with dual or liminal identities.

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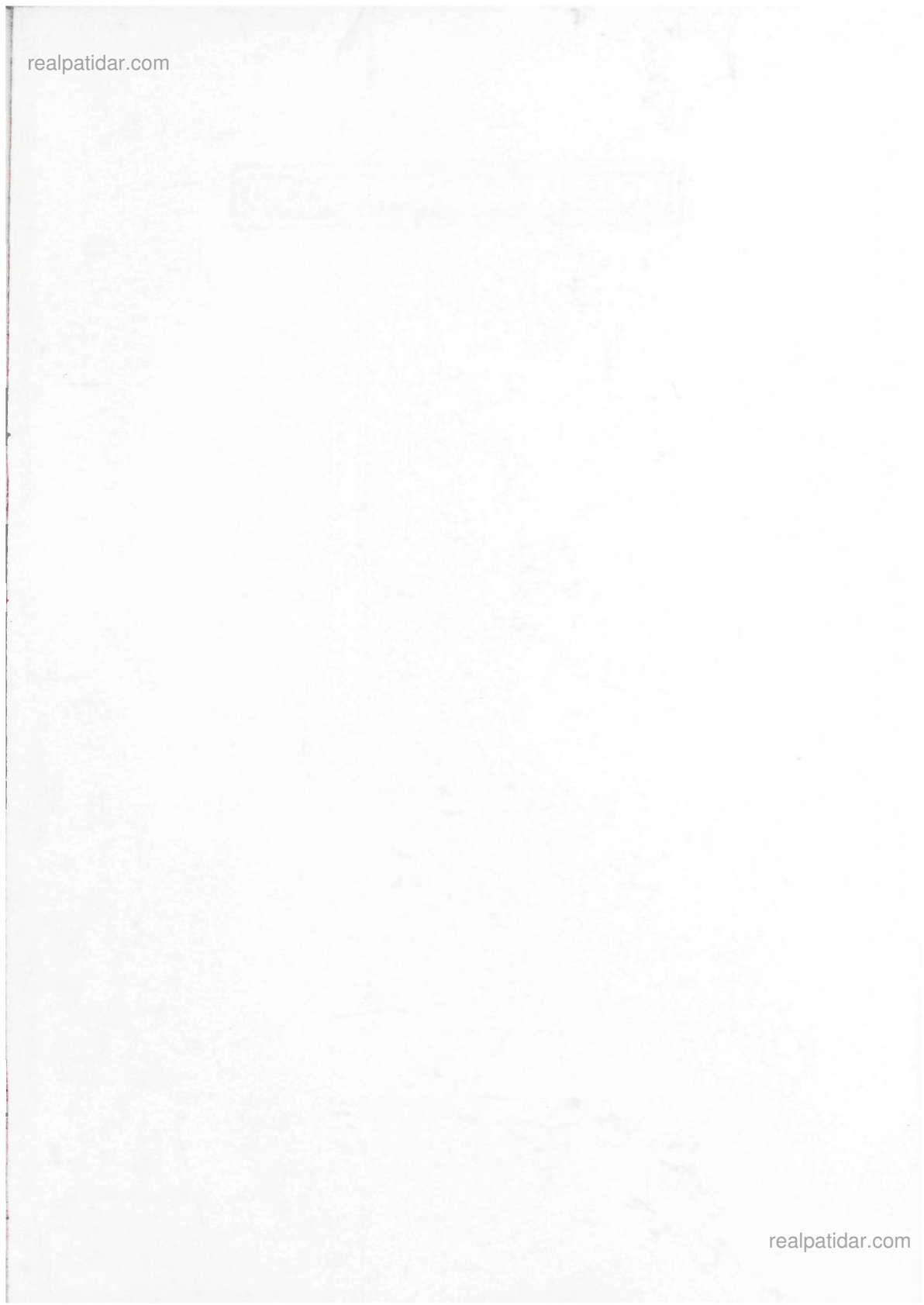
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### THE AUTHOR

**J.J. ROY BURMAN** (*b.1955*) is primarily an anthropologist having done his post-graduation from North Bengal University in Sociology and Social Anthropology. Immediately after obtaining the degree he worked on the impact of counter-insurgency among the Mizos in Mizoram as a Fellow of Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh. After living there in a village for about one year he joined Help Age India as Project Adviser for East and North-East India. After almost eight years of his direct contact with social work and social engineering, he joined Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, as a member of the Faculty. Apart from teaching Anthropology, Roy Burman also carries out research mainly on the problems in rural areas. Forests, environment, mass religion have been his main areas of interest. He is the first person in India to have done Ph.D. on Sacred Groves from the sociological perspective. Few anthropologists have had the opportunity to travel in the tribal and forest areas all over the country like him. Right now it has become his passion to portray the inter-ethnic harmonious relations in the country.

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# GUJARAT UNKNOWN

—Hindu-Muslim Syncretism and Humanistic Forays

**J.J. Roy Burman**



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**J.J. Roy Burman**

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## 4

# SYNCRETIC COMMUNITIES IN GUJARAT

Since a long time syncretic communities or communities with dual identities have flourished in Gujarat. The syncretic identities emerged mainly through the actions of the Sufi saints among the 'Hindu' communities or due to the Bhagat movements and Christianity among the Tribal communities. Here we have dealt with exclusively the Hindu-Muslim syncretic communities and are presenting a few cases.

Since the twelfth century Sufi saints started visiting Gujarat. The message of Sufi, however, spread more widely in the fourteenth century. Some of the prominent Sufi saints of the state are: Syed Nuruddin (1095-1143), Hazrat Kulbi Alam (1388-1446), Sheikh Bahauddin Bajan (1388-1506), Kazi Muhmud Dariai (1468-1534), Shah Ali Gamdhani (15th century), Khub Muhammad Chisti Khub (1539-1614), Baba Sahab (1618-1650), Samswale Ulkh (1668-1744). Many of them were poets and wrote in Parsi, Urdu and Gujarati.

Though the Sufis were Muslims and followed the message of Islam, their ways were different from the orthodoxy. They followed the path of love. They renounced the materialist world. Many of them could attract people from different religions to the path of Islam. Many peaceful conversions did take place as a result of this. Many of them also spoke of Hindu-Muslim harmony to defuse communal

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hatred.- Shah Ali Gamdhani, the famous Sufi saint of Ahmedabad wrote:

*Haj Jau Hu Ki Dwarka*

*Ghar koi na Dekhu Pyar Ka*

*Sab Khel Pyar Ka.*

To the Sufis who loved Allah, they gained the entire world of Allah. To the Sufis poor and rich, Hindus and Muslims were all equal to the creator. All should, therefore, first follow the ideals of life and reject selfishness.

Kazi Muhammad Dariai of Virpur was very popular among the Bhils and other Tribals. Many of them were hunters and ate non-vegetarian food. But Dariai was able to convert them and follow vegetarian food habit and convince the ideals of non-violence. Kazi Muhammad Dariai adopted the Bhakti-marg and philosophised the concept of God as male and Goddesses as female. Let us look more in details of the syncretic groups.

**Nizari Sect**

Nizari sect of the Shias originated in Persia and later spread over to Indian sub-continent. The different branches of Nizari communities were variously known as Shamsis, Maulais, Khojas, Satpanthis and Guptis. Later on they were globally called Khojas; nowadays they are known as Agakhani Khojas since they revere the Aga Khan as their living Imam and leader of their community.

There were some effect of Hinduization among the Ismailis and this resulted into innovative dynamic synthesis. The adoption of local traditions by the Nizari Pirs was not just out of desire to make converts; they rather tried to convince the Hindus that the new faith was nothing more than fulfillment of their former beliefs. Hinduism and Ismailism should therefore be neither identified nor 'mixed' — which amount to a synthesis or to syncretism.

Not very much in the past, there may not have been an idea of crystallized 'Hindu' identity following the Vedic tradition, as seen in the twentieth century. It is probable that





in their eyes Ismailism did not appear as something fundamentally different from their former beliefs. Many of the Ismaili leaders moved under the guise of Sufi saints and made important contributions towards interaction between Hindus and Muslims — like Pir Sadruddin. Sadruddin is supposed to be the inventor of a 'system of equivalences' between Hindu and Muslim concepts and terminologies. He is credited for converting Lohanas — a merchant community (Many consider them to be Rajputs) into Islam.

The Ismaili tradition set by Sadruddin was carried over by his disciple Hasan Kabiruddin (d. 1470). Kabiruddin followed a syncretic path and like Hindu saints wore white or saffron dresses. Like the Hindus ascetics he also adopted vegetarian food habit. His son Nur Muhammad Shah was the last undisputed leader of the faith and after his death the group split into various sects and the Pirana Panth or Sat Panth is the most prominent among them.

Many of the Nizari saints had dual-identities. Saint Nur Muhammad for instance, was equally known as 'Sat Gur Nur'. Among the untouchable castes of Gujarat, he was known as 'Matang Rishi'. Similarly Kabiruddin was also named 'Anant-jo-dhani'.

The Nizari *ginans* or texts have often been rewritten and recast the epics and legends associated with Hinduism. The Mahabharata and more particularly the figure of the God Vishnu — Krishna, champion of the *Bhakti*, inspired the Ismaili religious teachers. The Ismaili Imam had manifested himself to the Hindus in the form of Vishnu, Kalki, whose advent the Hindus still await.

The Nizari preachers are also believed to have played different roles in the Hindu epics and Puranic history in their former incarnations. For instance, Sadruddin may have appeared in an earlier birth as Sahadev — one of the Pandava brothers (heroes of Mahabharata) or as Krishna's brother Balaram; while in another era, he was Harishchandra, the famous king devotee. This apart the Nizaris and Hindus equated Muhammad with Brahma, Adam





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(and Imam Hasan) with Shiva, while Fatima was equated with great goddess Shakti. Similarly, the five Shia sacred figures or *Panjtan*, Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, Hussein and Fatima were as a whole comparable to the five Pandavas. This motif in a way helped in maintaining a continuity from Hinduism to Ismailism. The identification of Ismailis with the Nath tradition is also believed to have played a significant role in bridging with Islam. The absence of caste discrimination too is akin to Sant *Parampara*. The sect also was opposed to the rules of commensality between individuals and castes.

**Khoja**

Khojas are a group of the Ismailis. Like other Shia traditions, Ismailiyyah accepts the spiritual authority of Imam. However, unlike the mainstream Twelver Shias (Also known as Imamiyyah), the Ismailis regard Muhammad, son of Ismail as the seventh Imam and continue the line of Imam through Ismail and Muhammad's descendants. For this reason Ismailiyyah are known as Sevener Shiites. Ismaili doctrine considers history to be divided into seven periods. Each period begins with a prophet who is then followed by six infallible Imams. The first six prophets are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each Imam accompanied by an interpreter taught the secret meaning of Imam's teachings to a small circle of initiates. The six Shia imams were followers Muhammad and his interpreter Ali. The Ismailis believe that Islamic law should be repealed. They reject the Quran and all forms of prayers in the main Islamic tradition. They interpret Islamic teachings spiritually, which frees them from adhering to the laws and obligations such as prayer, fasting and *haj*.

The origin of the Ismailis can be traced to the second half of the eighth century in West Asia. Effective missionary activity spread beyond Iraq into North Africa. In Egypt they occupied the seat of power and held it up till 1171 when Fatimid caliphate was overthrown. Shortly before its defeat in Egypt, Ismailiyyah split into two groups called Nizaris and Mustalis due to power play. While the Mustailis continued to





dwelt in Egypt, the Nizaris fled Egypt to settle down in various parts of Iran and Syria. The sect became quite powerful and gained State power in Syria for 150 years till the conquest of Mongols. The Ismailis suffered tremendously at the hands of Baybars, Ottomans and Nusayris.

After the Nizaris suffered defeat in Iran, many of them emigrated to India fourteenth century onwards. They subsequently came to be known as Khoja — meaning 'master' in Persian. After living in India for a long time the Khojas made many compromises and attached little importance to traditional Ismaili Islamic rituals and practices.

Some people view that the Khojas were belonging to the trading class and that they were first converted by Pir Sadruddin in the later 14th century in Sindh (Now in Pakistan). From Sindh the religion spread to Kutch, Kathiawad, Gujarat and Mumbai. According to certain sources Pir Sadruddin was a Hindu priest named Sahdev. On being caught and disgraced when stealing, he left the temple, changed his dress and took the name of Sadruddin.

Pir Sadruddin lived for some time amongst the rich Hindu land owners called Thakkers. The Thakkers believed that God Vishnu lived through nine incarnations on this earth. Sadruddin, however, convinced them that Hazrat Ali was the tenth *Avtar* (Incarnation) of Vishnu. The Thakkers then adopted a religion which was a peculiar admixture of Sufi and Hindu ideas. A book called 'Das Avtar' remained to be the main religious text of this sect till recently. Since the Hindu community did not accept the converted Thakkers, Pir Sadruddin gave them the title 'Khwaja'. The word Khoja is a phonetic corruption of the word Khwaja. The sect got consolidated by the efforts of Sadruddin and many of his disciples and devotees of the faith. The ideas finally got crystallized to those of Ismaili Nizari faith; particularly after the arrival of the Agha Khan from Iran to India in the first half of 19th century. While many of the Khojas have moved towards Islamic orthodoxy, few are drifting back towards Hinduism (Ref: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-khoja.htm>).

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Some glimpses of the present position of the Khojas can be understood through the case of a Khoja village — Singura. There are about thirty Khoja households at Sinugra village of Anjar taluka in Kutch district. The Khojas were numerically many more previously, but several of them have now migrated to Africa and Canada. The Khojas were first settled in the village by land grants from the Girasia — a Rajput king. Some of the Khoja ancestors had served the Girasiahs had previously served in the court of the king.

Most of the Khojas in the village were earlier cultivators, but now they have given up and taken to trading for survival. A few are into services as well. The Khojas settlement is in one end of the village. They, however, do interact with the adjoining Hindu neighbours as well. It could be seen that many Hindu neighbours pass through the residence of Nur Ali Sacche Dina (75 years old Khoja gentleman) as a short cut to reach an adjoining Mahadeo temple. His wife is found burning incense sticks in the evenings and spreading around the smoke in the house like the Hindu housewives of the locality do.

It is not an exception that Nur Ali's wife occasionally pays obeisance at the adjoining Mahadeo and Hanuman temple. Many of the other Khoja women in the locality do the same. Khojas in the village join many of the Hindu festivals and make it a point to attend the garba and dandiya-ras celebrations of the village during Navratri. The Khoja housewives also offer *Prasad* and money at the Ashapura Mata's temple during Navratri like the Hindu neighbours. The Khojas also join the Holi revelry with the rest of the villagers. They too kindle lamps and offer coconuts at the temple of Lord Kakar. In a way the identity of Hindu-Muslim is slightly blurred among them. Incidentally Nur Ali refers to Sunnis as 'Musalman' and not to themselves.

At village Shergadh in Keshod taluka of Junagadh district the Khojas visit the temples of Ram and Shiv during the annual *pujas*. They celebrate Diwali and kindle lamps at home. Many of the Khoja women worship Sitala Mata and

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do *manta*. They consider Krishna as the tenth *avtar* of God. During *Satam* and *Ashtam* they do not go to the agricultural fields like any other Hindu peasant. In the social field the Khojas of Shergadh do not permit marrying father's brother's daughter like it is normally seen among all Muslim communities of West Asia and North India.

The secular trends of the Khojas can be realized from the case of Bhariyad village of Dhanduka taluka in Ahmedabad district as well. There used to be a number of Khoja families in the village earlier, but all of them have now migrated abroad. But these Khojas have not cut off all their links with the village. They still worship the Sati Mata as their clan deity and some of their representatives come every year for the annual worship of Sati Mata.

The more remarkable feature of this village is that in 1990 Hyder Ali, one Khoja gentleman who had studied till class seven in the village and used to live with his grandmother, donated all the money to construct a Hindu temple — that of Ambaji, right next to the temple of Sati Mata. Hyder Ali's father is from Anand and he himself is these days staying in the United States and running a chain of hotels. He apparently gifted the money after he saw a dream and when his wishes were fulfilled. He appointed Shantiram Ramanuj — a Brahmin of the village as a *pujari* and a member of a Trust which was formed in the name of Hyder's mother. The Trust apart from constructing the temple and managing it has also provided tap water facility to the entire village. Hyder Ali has also donated rupees twenty five lakhs to the Trust so that village developmental activities can be undertaken with the interest accrued from the savings.

The development activities undertaken by Hyder Ali is not very surprising considering the fact that the migrant Khojas of the village still have not severed their ties with the clan deity — Sati Mata located in the village. Besides, while there is not a single Muslim family in the village, there is a big dargah of Mehmud Shah Bukhari, right next to the Sati Mata and Ambaji temples. Presently the devotees visiting the

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dargah also visit the temples. Even Muslim pilgrims are found resting within the temple premises. It cannot also be forgotten that in the past the Khojas of the village were Lohana Thakkers — Hindus and they were converted only during the British rule.

**Pirana Sect or Satpanthi**

The sect of Satpanthi was founded by Imam Shah Bawa, a Sufi saint of fourteenth-fifteenth century. On being fed up with the Islamic religious orthodoxy, he created a sect where elements of Hindu traditions were associated to Sufi Islamic belief and practices. The new sect became famous in no time under the name of 'Satpanth' — 'True Path'. It is also sometimes referred to as 'Imam Shahi'. The main elements of Satpanthis are basically the same as in the Nizari Khoja tradition: Nishkalank, Atharva Veda, Ginan. Imam Shah did not start any new religion and rather adopted the elements of the Vedas and reinforced them among the masses as a Sufi saint (Karandas Maharaj, nd.). The sect is believed to be as old as 600 years old (Bunsha: 2004).

Imam Shah was the son of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin of Multan (now in Pakistan). He traced his descent back to Jaffarul Sadiq and his son Ismail. That is why the Imam himself and the present Sayyids are known as "Jaffri Ismailis". It is said that on failing to gain the nomination for the Imamship and also the support of Khojas of Sindh the Pir migrated to Kutch and established the Pirana sect.

The following of the sect is to be found both among Hindus and Muslims. The unusual powers of the Pir were first acknowledged in Sindh (now in Pakistan) by a Khoja called Premji. The Pir on moving to Gujarat (at the age of eighteen) had an encounter with the sultan — Mehmud Shah Begda. It is believed that through his miraculous powers the Pir outwitted the sultan and then onwards the title Begda was attached to the name of the king.

Imam Shah arrived at Giramha when a severe drought condition prevailed for two years. The place was then infested with wild animals like tigers. The Pir shot an arrow over there

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and being impressed by his powers the animals fled off the scene. The Pir's mausoleum is believed to be located at that site only and is popularly known as Pirana, signifying 'coming of the Pir'.

There is a myth that once Imam Shah met a group of Hindu pilgrims (Brahmins) on their way to Kashi. The Pir pursued them not to take the trouble of going so far and he showed them the vision of reaching Kashi and having a dip in the holy water of Ganges in one night. Subsequently they all adopted Imam Shah as their spiritual head (Incidentally 25 kilograms of 'janoi'— sacred threads were presented to the Satpanthis by the Brahmins every year. Those who were actually converted are known as Momna (from Momin) believers; while those not actually converted, but followed a half-Hindu and half-Islamic faith, came to be known as Matia — from 'mat' — opinion. Another group of half converted Hindus came to be known as Shaikh or Shaiknda. All these groups collectively comprise of the Piranapanthis or Satpanthis (District Gazetteer).

The syncretic sect of Imam Shahi or Piranapanthi, became very popular among the agriculturists including the Hindu community called Matia Kunbi. Besides, the Rabaris, Sonis and Vantias — while continued to worship Hindu deities and embrace the Piranapanthi sect. Imam Shah added to the syncretic note by stating that Nur Satgur was Brahma and he himself was the Avtar of Vishnu — the foremost deity of the Vaishnavas. This permitted the poorer classes to accept Satpanthi faith (the Popular name of the followers of Imam Shah). Nur Muhammad Shah was exalted to a station equivalent to the revered Hindu figures like Ram and Krishna. The Satpanthis read the Imamshah's religious book in which rules of Atharva Veda are also mentioned. They keep the Ramzan fast and celebrate the urs of Imamshah. They also celebrate the Hindu festivals like Holi, Akhatrij, Divaso, Balev and Diwali. During nikah or marriage ceremony Brahmin pujaris too are involved to solemnize the occasion.

The main center of the Satpanth sect is located at a village called Pirana, 16 kms away from Ahmedabad. There

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is a big dargah complex of Imam Shah at Pirana. The dargah of Pirana has, however, been under dispute for a long time. In 1939 a court case was filed by a number of Patel devotees against the Hindu Guru of the sect — Kaka Ramji Laxman, then supported by a few Muslim Syyids. A Trust was then formed — consisting of seven Kutchi Patels (Hindus coming from Kutch, Kanam, Surat and Petlad) and three Syyids, on the basis of the religion of the devotees. About 85 per cent devotees are Hindus. Later on the Trust was registered by the Charity Commissioner, according to Bombay Public Trust Act of 1950 — under the 'E' category, which is defined as 'cosmopolitan'.

The Hindu Satpanthis used to read the Kalma till 1991. But since the orthodoxy grew, the practice was stopped. The Patels assert Hindu identity of the shrine by citing the presence of 'Akhand Jyoti' (Perpetual Lamp) by the side of the temple, which is kindled by Ghee and not oil as is seen in Muslim shrines.

A 'dholi' or a resting place of Imam Shah stands next to the dargah. If the walls depicted the miracles of Imam Shah and his life, the ceiling is entirely covered colourful representations of ten avatars of Vishnu and other gods and goddesses. There is a mural depicting the Hindu trinity — Vishnu, Mahesh (Shiva) and Brahma. On the top of the entry gate one reads the word 'Puja Khand' or prayer hall as seen in Hindu temples.

This means the 1st Kaka called Shana Kaka was a muslim

Imam Shah converted many Hindus into Islam and entrusted the custody of the dargah to one of them. Many converts joined the management of the shrine maintaining celibacy and vegetarian food habit and they are called Kaka — meaning servant in Persian. The supreme manager is called Gadipati or Guru Maharaj (by the Hindus at present). Many attempts have been made to Sanskritize the shrine and one finds the word 'Ohm' inscribed at many places within the shrine. New form of Aarti — worship has been evolved since 1991.

The dholia (about which mention has been made earlier)





has been transformed into a temple with idols. The place is being called 'Pirana Prerna Pith'. The Hindu custodians are considered Guptis — they outwardly look as Hindus, in reality they still follow a number of Muslim customs of the Satpanth. The identity of the Patels attached to the dargah was in the form of taqiyya. Conversion to Islam really took place. But now under the influence of conservative Hindu forces they are asserting Hindu identity. The mosque and madrasa attached to the dargah has now been fenced off.

Gupti  
and  
Taqiyya

Surprisingly the Kaka (Head) of the shrine views, however, that the saint Imam Shah is considered as an *avtar* of Lord Brahma like the Nizari Ismailis do. It was also possible to refer the word Pir Shah and even to recite the Kalma.

The official book published by the Trust does mention the name of the saint as Satguru Sri Imam Shah Maharaj, but portrays a picture of the saint with a long beard, holding a rosary in his right hand and displaying a *tilak* on the forehead. There is not even the slightest allusion to the existence of Sayyids, or other Muslim disciples. The Sayyids have their own book relating the same stories in their own way.

After the demolition of Babri Masjid, many structures were added to the shrine by the Hindus. The Sayyids were also forbidden to enter into the common kitchen then onward. A separate *langar* or collective eating was too started. The Sayyids were also forced to do the daily '*Ghat-pat puja*' separately. *Indian Express* (March 17, 2003) reported that these days the Hindus do not permit the Muslims to take the *tazia* procession during the Muharram, through the premises of the dargah any more.

Bunsha (2004) observes that in the post-Babri Masjid demolition fervour, the VHP allied with Karsan Kaka and the trustees to arrange a huge Sadhu Sammelan inside the dargah complex in 1993. They pledged to 're-convert' to Hinduisim and change the shrine into a temple. The dargah was re-named 'Prerna Pith' or 'samadhi mandir'.

The Hinduization process of the Satpanth has not been





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confined only to Gujarat. In 1995, the sect was declared as a Vedic Sampradaya in the Bharatiya Vedic Sammelan held in Mumbai. A leader of the Swaminarayan sect also declared that Imam Shah was not a Muslim and was born to a Brahmin family, but had to conceal his identity under Islamic threats. The Hindu take over of the Pirana sect is also evident from the fact that a Pirana temple is now being constructed at Nakhatrana. Within the temporary temple shed a picture of Imamshah has been placed along with the pictures of many Hindu gods and goddesses. In 1999 a national level Sadhu Sammelan (Congregation) was organized within the temple premises. Around 2300 sadhus and the four Shankacharyas had attended the Sammelan. No Muslims were invited.

A rapid observation at a village called Narsanda in Nadiad district revealed that many of the Vankars who had adopted the Satpanth sect — Pirana, are getting disillusioned. There are about hundred Vankar families in the village. All of them have given up their weaving occupation and many have become service holders. Some have become drivers and are running autorickshaws for a living. Many are working as wage labourers.

Most of the Vankar Satpanthis are found not to just worship Imam Shah, but also several other Hindu gods and goddesses. Arvind S. Parmar, aged 30 years, for instance keeps the pictures of Bhatriji Maharaj, Chamunda and Hanuman along with that of Imam Shah Baba in his worship place. Kusum Behn, aged 34 years, keeps the pictures of Hanuman, Laxmi, Shanker, Shiva linga with that of Imam Shah Baba. The Vankars stated that these days they only perform a special ceremony for the infants (Kankar Bhartna) when they are about two months old (Rites de passage) quite like the Muslims do. At the time of the initiation ceremony the *pujari* offers water — called 'ammi' or 'nur' to all who have assembled. At the time of death, *ziyarat* is done and a *pujari* is called. Apart from these they do one annual ceremony at home organizing reading of the 'Granth'.

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It came to light that in the present time a number of Vankars are leaving the Pirana sect and are embracing Christianity. In fact the women are getting more easily proselytized. There are hardly any Satpanthi Vankars anymore in the surrounding villages of Ananad and Nadiad.

It is, however, surprising that as yet during the annual Sud-Duj ritual in the Chaitra month is yet attended in large numbers both by Hindus and Muslims at Pirana. Many pilgrims come from long distances on foot. Many Muslims and Hindus also congregate at the shrine to celebrate the Bakri Id. Goats are too sacrificed during the ceremony. Hence the tussle between Hinduization and secular values are on centering the Pirana sect. Many human right activists and eminent lawyers also have come forward to uphold the humanistic traditions of the sect in general and the shrine in particular.

**The Pranami People**

In India there are exists a number of sects which are broadly placed under the rubric of Hinduism but they reveal many traits which are akin to other religions and more often so with Islam. The present day pan-Hindu trends have significantly obscured the existence of the minor sects. However, it must be realized that these sects still play a very important role among the general masses. "Calling these traditions 'syncretic' has often been a convenient way of leaving a number of essential questions unanswered. The fact that the traditional diversity of Islam and Hinduism, now often misconstrued as two monolithic and 'eternally' antagonistic blocs, tends to be denied, while so-called 'mainstream', 'orthodox' forms of Hinduism and Islam emerge as powerful models, also obscures the complexities of past and present realities" (Khan: 2003). The pressure of the orthodox elements from both the faith is making it difficult for these sects to remain liminal — that is to say to retain their position 'on the threshold', in-between two sharply defined entities — to become identified as either Hindu or as Muslim.

The Pranami sect or religion needs to be considered as

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one such liminal group which has largely gone unnoticed. It may be brought to notice that Gandhi following his mother and her ancestors was associated with the Pranami religion. His mother used to take him to the local Prannathi temple in Porbandar during his childhood. In the temple Hindu and Muslim sacred texts were read out and commented upon. Thus the question which arises is that what do the broad labels 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' really mean ? There are still communities in South Asia who refuse to choose between the two denominations and declare themselves by mentioning their caste or sect (Oberoi, 1994 :11).

The followers of the Pranami religion follow a text 'Kuljamswarup' and do not have faith in idol worship. The religious sect was propagated by Shri Mehraj Thakur, popularly known as Mahamati Prannnth. He devoted his entire life to the preaching of universal brotherhood, toleration and religious unity. Presently the Pranami or Nijanandi religious tradition has about three million followers spread over Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Nepal.

The Pranami faith is believed to have been initiated by Swami Devchandra who was born in Sindh (now in Pakistan). Once when travelling through the deserts of Kutch, he came across a bearded soldier who imparted many esoteric teachings to him and explained to him how to join a caravan and suddenly disappeared. According to the Pranamis the soldier was no other than Prophet Muhammad. Devchandra travelled widely and visited many gurus and temples and finally became a disciple of Swami Haridas of the Radhavallabhi Sampraday — a sect centered on Krishna's devotion, more particularly to Radha — his consort. He then regularly visited a 'Shyam Mandir'. It is said that one day he received a new *mantra* called 'Taratam Mantra' directly from God. He then started his own sect called 'Nijanand'.

The main propagator of the Nijanand sect was, however,





not Devchandra but his follower Mehraj — the son Keshav Thakur (Belonging to the Lohana caste), the Diwan of Jamnagar State. Devchandra imparted the 'Taratam Mantra' to Mehraj and asked him to preach the same world over. Mehraj later came to be known as Mahamati Prannath became the main organizer of the movement and the author of its holy scripture the Kuljamsawarup.

Prannath at some time visited Arabia and Basra in Iraq where he spread his message among the Hindu traders and local Muslims. He also himself studied the local culture, religion and philosophy. On his return to Jamnagar in 1651, he had some tiff with the local king and was subsequently made the Diwan of Dharol and later the Diwan of Jamnagar. Afterwards due to some court intrigues he was jailed. From within the jail premises Prannath started popularizing devotional songs and later when he was released, he devoted his entire attention to religion. He then began travelling widely spreading the message of his faith.

Once when in Merta (Presently in Rajasthan), listening to the *azan* from a nearby mosque, Prannath had a revelation: He discovered the inner meaning of the Kalima, the Islamic creed of confession (There is no God but Muhammad is the Prophet of God) and its equivalence with the 'Taratam Mantra'. He felt that Muhammad himself had inspired him to bring the Muslims to the right path. Later when in Delhi, a Muslim named Sheikh Badal had become his faithful disciple. Many other Muslims became his disciples along with the Hindus. Kayam Mulla was another important Muslim disciple of his. No wonder some regarded him as a Muslim faquir and others as Hindu sadhu. It was amazing that both the groups under his tutelage were reading the *Vedas* and *Kateb* together. Prannath himself stressed that the difference between Hindus and Muslims is useless as both are children of the same God. He wrote:

*Brahman Kahe Hum Uttam, Musalman Kahe Hum Pak  
Dono Mutthi Ek Thowrki, Ek Rakh Duji khak.*





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Prannath also wrote:

*Iya Quran Iya Puran*

*Ek Kagaj Dou Praman*

*Kalam Allah*

*Iya Hadise*

*Sastra Puran Ya Ved*

Prannath is believed to have told Aurangzeb:

*Swyee Khuda*

*Swayee Brahma*

Prannath meant that Khuda and Brahma were the same

Towards the later stages of his life Prannath visited Panna in Madhya Pradesh and blessed the local king Chhatrasal against the Mughals with a betel leaf and a magical sword. The event is still commemorated by the descendents of Chatrasal at the Khejra Mandir in Panna.

It is interesting to find that, the religious movement organized by Prannath is constantly referred to as *Din-e-Islam* or even simply *Islam* and the disciples are *momins*. According to traditions it is believed that Prannath was interested in establishing a universal religion which would put a halt to endless disputes and quarrels between the followers of different sects and religions. The Pranami religion is also opposed to caste differences and vies for equality between men and women. Nijanandis are to be strictly vegetarian and abstain from alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

The Nijanandi philosophy suggests the sacred texts should not be understood literally and their secret esoteric meanings should be fathomed. "The holy scriptures of the Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus contain the same basic truths, but either these are incomplete or not interpreted correctly. Only the Imam Mahdi (Mahamati Prannath) can understand and expose this hidden meaning: this is actually the main purpose of the Imamate" (Khan: *ibid.*).

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Pranamis accept the Islamic precept of coming of 12,000 prophets before Muhammad and recognize two supreme forms of Krishna as equal to him, before the advent of Devchandra, who is also called Buddha-Kalki *avatar* and identified with Shyama (Krishna's consort) and Ruh'allah, and Prannath who is Buddha-Nishkalank Avatar and Imam Mahdi and a manifestation of Nur Muhammadi, the Kalam or the Divine Verb.

Prannath himself was opposed to forming any structured organization and ruled that volunteers leading ordinary household life should take care of the temples and organize the disciples. But this did not happen as celibate gurus appeared on to the scene and many of the temples are managed by them. Some of them keep beards or shave their heads and wear ochre colour clothes in the Hindu style. The devotees also cover their heads with clothes before entering into a temple like seen in Muslim shrines. The anniversary of Prannath or any other saint is celebrated like *urs* is celebrated in Muslim dargahs. Many of the dead persons belonging to the Pranami sect are buried according to the Islamic fashion, in the recumbent position.

The Pranami religion is now divided into two groups — Krishna Pranami and Nijanandi. While one tries to reach the God directly, the other reaches Him through a medium — the Gurus. The former calls its temple as Krishna Pranami Mandir and the other as 'Prannath Mandir'

Going through the modern literature published by the sect bodies one may gain the impression that Pranami religion is like any other Bhakti tradition. But only those who can have a direct access to the original texts and possess a deep knowledge of the history of religions in South Asia would be able to perceive that it is actually something different. Whatever different may it be, the sect at present reveals strong influence of Hinduism at certain places and promotes vegetarian diet and Sanskritised slokas. Some of the monks openly refute linkages with Islam. Yet in many areas the Pranami followers have revealed strong inclinations against





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communalization of the society. After all they are all against idol worship. In 1992 to the contrary, Muslims in Surat opposed communal elements amongst them from attacking the Pranami temple which is located in a Muslim predominated area. Also, during floods the Muslims take refuge in the temple premises which is located on a slightly higher elevation.

It appears that the background of followers of Pranami religion differs from place to place. While in Jamnagar and Kheda the following is more among higher castes like Karwa Patels, in Santrampur of Panchmahal district, a Pranami temple is located in a locality (Pranami falia) exclusively inhabited by Vankars — Dalits. All the Dalits there are followers of Pranami religion. A Srimali Brahmin is the *pujari* of the temple. Inside the temple hall there is no idol but a pulpit where the religious text 'Kuljamswaroopsagar' is kept. A trident, pictures of duck and peacock are kept by the side of the text. On the top of the pulpit a 'Panja' — symbol of Prannath is kept. On one side of the hall a picture of the Kul Guru — a Nagar Brahmin is kept. Unlike Muslim shrines, women are permitted to enter into the inner assembly hall. But all are supposed to cover their heads on entering the temple hall.

The Dalit settlement is surrounded by Muslim population in all directions. While the Muslims are mostly in the transport business, the Dalits are in the service sector or are hawkers vending in the streets. There are seventy eight Dalit teachers of Pranami Falia serving in different parts of the State. A lot of Dalits lost their agricultural lands in a nearby dam. Some of them also have sold off their lands to get into the service sector.

It is interesting to note that in spite of a large Muslim population, there has been very little effect of communal pogroms that occurred in the surrounding areas. The Muslims adjoining the Pranami Falia, in fact assured confidence to the Dalits during the riots to remain where they are. Similarly the Muslim shopkeepers renting the Hindu

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houses were untouched. The Dalits in the Pranami Falia in fact refused to cooperate with some of the Hindu fanatics who were instigating them to attack the Muslims. There is a close interaction between the two communities in the hamlet. In 1987 when a religious shibir — discourse camp was organized by the Dalits — Nijanand Sampradaya (community), the Muslims too joined it without hesitation. They listened to the sermons made by gurus of all religions. Prasad too was consumed by them. The Muslims in this way got involved in many inter-religion functions and celebrations. Till about eight years back many Muslim girls joined the 'garba' dance during Navratri.

The syncretic credentials of Pramipanthi in Santrampur, however, do not seem to have a fool proof effect on the inter-community relationships. There were threat percepts and curfew was imposed in Santrampur for a couple of days. A village called Sant (about two kilometers away from Santrampur and 100 years old) which has a good number of Muslim residents was looted during the 2002 riots. Stones were thrown and Muslim houses and attacked. Sixty two houses were burnt down in the process. Even a dargah, that of Sehduallah Baba was not spared and was raged to the ground. The Tribals of the village (With 125 households) were frequent visitors to it. The Brahmins of the village, numbering around 50 households, also were frequent visitors to the dargah. During the riots, the arson and loot that followed compelled the Muslims to leave the village for some time. It is reported that many of the plunderers were from Santrampur town and also many of them belonged to the Tribal and Dalit communities.

Even in Santrampur proper Muslims have little say and their educational and economic conditions are very poor. In the local collage — Adivasi Arts and Commerce College, there are only five per cent Muslim students. The attendance of the Muslim students in the high school at Sant village too is very little. They rather flock to the madrassa which imparts Islamic education.

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In Dahod city, in the outskirts there is a Pranami temple next to a locality inhabited exclusively by the Vankars. This temple is said to be thirty years old. The Kuljamswaroop was brought away from the old temple located in the heart of the city where Muslims predominate. The Pranami religion followers of the city meet regularly for religious discourses and are aware about the secular orientation of the faith. Yogeshbahi Parmar, one of the experts of the Pranami faith, in Dahod recites a poem in this connection very often:

*Jo manne wale hain Ranke  
Unko Islamse bu ati hain  
Aur jo manne wale hain Islamke  
Unko Ramke names bu ati hain  
Ai Khuda kaun chalega tere naksha  
Kadam par  
Yaha Insan ko Insanse bu ati hain.*

One of the most important temples of the Pranamis is located at Khamalia Naka, Khijramandir in Jamnagar. Two khijra trees — believed to be more than 450 years old stand next to the main temple. Devotees from all over the country visit the shrine; some even come from Nepal. Some of the Muslim neighbours are also reported to visit it to witness the cultural programmes — psalms. A charitable dispensary by the temple is also frequented by the Muslims. The *pujaris* of the Pranami temple at Khijri mandir, though acknowledge the mention of Islam in kuljamswaroop, however, believe that Muslims have deviated from the rules of the faith. The views of the *pujaris* are not very wrong or mistaken; anthropologists like Sinha and Ekka (2003) too have tried to link Pranami religion as an agent of Hinduism through the Bhagat movement among the Patelia tribes of Gujarat.

### **Molesalam Girasiah**

Napa Vata village in Anand district is a large multi-ethnic village. But it is predominated by Molesalam Girasiahs. The Molesalam Girasiahs reveal a dual identity though they are identified as Muslims. The Girasiahs of Napa Vata village





claim to have come from Tunktora village of Rajasthan. They were Rajputs and got converted to Islam as they migrated here. The king gave them 'mohor' — stamp and authority over large areas. The tenants of the land gave their share — 'giras' to them. That is how they acquired the name Molesalam Girasiah. The Girasiahs received land at a number of nearby villages of Anand like Napa, Napad, Valasan, Mogar, Karamsad, Gajna, Umeta and Ankav.

The Girasiahs of Napa believe in a story as to the way they emerged in this world. According to the story, there was a king who had no children. Once he came across a fakir and begged him for two sons, promising that he would give the elder son away to the services of the ascetic. Due to the blessings of the fakir he got two sons. Some time later the fakir came to ask for one of the sons — the first one. But the king refused to give away the son and hid him chained under the floor against the boy's wishes. The fakir, however, realized it and addressed the hidden son to hold his kalam (third) finger of the right hand and say 'Bismillah'. When the boy did so, he became unfettered and emerged out breaking open the slab of the floor. The Fakir converted the boy into Islam and named him — Arjan Shah. The other boy who remained with the king turned to be a Rajput with the surname Solanki. Arjun Shah's descendants came to be known as Molesalam Girasiah.

The Molesalam Girasiahs have dual names mixed with Hindu and Islam (like the informant's name is Rashid Bhai Himmat Sinh). Their surnames are also similar to that of Hindus, like — Rathore, Solanki, Chauhan, Parmar etc. The Girasiah women wear sarees just as the Hindu Gujarati women do. In their marriage ceremonies dandiyaras, garba dances, drum beats are done quite like the Hindu — Rajput counterparts. The Molesalam Girasiahs still take pride in their Rajput identity — as the pure ones.

### **The Jam Community**

The Kutch district is culturally divided into a number of





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geographically demarcated areas by the local people, such as Wagher, Kutch, Banny and Paccham. The Paccham area bordering with Runn of Kutch is extremely dry and arid.

Paccham area did not ever have a very strong authoritative centralized power base as the people were mostly pastoralists and trade facilitators. No wonder the area is inhabited by various communities who have dual identities. It is very difficult to place them as Hindu or as Muslim. In their dress habits, they resemble the people across the border (Sindh) to a great extent. Jam is one such community inhabiting the Khavda region of Paccham.

The Jams are found living in twelve contiguous villages of Paccham. They have a Mukhia or chief who takes care of the social norms and resolves conflicts arising within the community. The chief resides at Jam Kinaraiya village. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-caste village. Previously all the 220 houses were huddled together into a single settlement. But after the earthquake, different caste-centered hamlets have cropped up.

Though the Jams reveal a distinct ethnic entity, it is reported that they mostly get married to women from Sotha and Jadeja communities of Nakhatrana, about 60-70 kilometers away. Many suspect that the Jams practice female infanticide. The reason for this is unknown. Jams bury their dead like the Muslims usually do.

Jams celebrate both Id and Diwali with the same gusto. In Kinariya village they regard Ashapura Mata as the tutelary deity and join the rituals as practiced by all other communities of the village. They also propitiate Shanker and Hanuman in the village temples. The entire village also, on the other hand, propitiates the dargah of Jaita Pir in the village. The Jams are the custodians of this dargah. Funds are collected from the entire village for the occasion. Only recently, the Sama Muslims have stopped donating funds, though they offer their tractors and water tankers during the festival. Funds are also donated by the Lohanas of Khavda.

The Jams join the Navratri celebrations in the village like

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any other Hindu. Diwali is also celebrated equally. Previously bullocks used to be decorated and races organized. Presently horse and camel races are organized. Muharram is similarly a big occasion and *tazias* are taken out in a procession. In fact, the *tazia* procession begins from the house of the residence of Prithviraj — the Jam chief.

The Jam names indicate both Hindu and Muslim affiliation. For instance, Keshav, aged 15 years is the son of Sama — a Muslim Jam. His brothers are Rashid, Allana. Sisters are Kalubai, Aminabai, Jinnatbai and Ranbai. Keshav frequents both temples and mosques.

There is complete economic interdependence between the Hindus and Muslims of Jam Kinaria. Exchange labour system is very frequent among the farming families. Hindu and Muslim labourers are hired by the farmers of both faiths. Belaji Hajaji is a Gowar (shepherd) who is hired by the entire village for grazing the cattle. He is paid Rs. 50 per month by every family. Micro-credit groups too have been formed in the village and such groups have both Hindu and Muslim members commonly. One such group formed twelve years back has members like Kakkubai, Sarabai (a Muslim) and Parmabehn (a Dalit).

### **The Jath Community**

Quite like the Jam community, there exists another syncretic community close to the Runn of Kutch known as 'Jath'. The Jats are mainly distributed in the Bunni area of Kutch. The Jaths usually stay in uni-ethnic settlements. In Bara Bhitara village for example there are only Jath residents.

Bara Bhitara village is in a dried and arid area where very little agriculture is possible and no wonder that all the Jaths are pastoralists who raise buffaloes for a living. They mostly graze their cattle in the surrounding bush land and rarely migrate out like the 'Maldhari' Rabaris do. According to certain quarters they too earlier led a nomadic life and grazed the buffaloes to far off places and even to Pakistan. Even as of now, when extreme drought conditions prevail, some of the villagers take their cattle to 'Gujarat' area. One particular Jath

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takes his cattle by truck to Adrej village in central Gujarat. He has forged close ties since last twenty five years with a Hindu family of the village and often grazes the cattle on his field. He also purchases fodder from other Hindu families. Similarly under adverse climatic conditions the people of Adrej send their cattle to Bunni area under the custody of Muslim partners.

### Mir Community

The Mirs are a highly syncretic community with dual identity. The presence of a Mir family is indispensable in villages with a high number of Thakur caste as Mirs are required to perform — cry and sing during death ceremonies and marriage celebrations. They have dual identities. A Mir of the Salal village in Sabarkantha district for instance, has a Hindu name — Bharat Bhai. His wife's name is Neeru Behn and children are: Pintu, Bijal, Sheetal, Deepak and Amit. The Mirs bury their dead bodies and do nikah — or marriage — following the traditional Muslim traditions. Marriage within the same clan is, however, not permitted and cross-cousin marriage is favoured.

Among the Mirs certain rituals are prevalent which do not match with either with typical Muslim communities or with Hindus. A pregnant woman for instance, is presented with a set of clothes and two coconuts which are placed on the lap. Out of these two, one is immediately broken and the other is broken after the birth of the child. On delivery, the baby is first bathed. On the sixth day the baby is again bathed together with the mother.

Mirs recall that they have converted to the fold of Islam about 700 years back. They attend Friday prayers in local mosques, but rarely do five times namāz a day. They believe in Pirs and also in oracles of Anis at every conceivable opportunity. They observe Muharram, Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-Juha but fasts during the Ramzan month are not usually observed. They also sing and play during the Hindu festivals (Singh: 2002).

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Baba Mir, 30 years old, a resident of Palasva village is a prominent leader of the village. He is a Krishna Bhakt and maintains fast during the month of *Shravan* like many other Hindus of the village. Baba Mir also occasionally visits the Hindu temples to pay his obeisance. Baba's great grandfather lives in Brajvani village of Ropar taluka in Kutch. A big stone commemorating the identity of Mirs is placed in the courtyard of his house. Every Diwali all the Mirs of Wagher congregate there to reinforce their identity and the community bonds. Baba Mir like any other Mir celebrates Uthasani and Janmastahmi with much fun fare. He also celebrates Id and Muharram with equal vibe.

The identity of the Mirs at Palasva village also centers around their location of residence. Thus Mirs residing in the Wagher area of Kutch are known as Wagher Mir. There are 72 Mir households in all in the Wagher region. The Mirs traditionally used to train war horses and play music during cultural festivals, marriage and death ceremonies. Different Mir families are attached to specific Hindu and Muslim families and they attend the rituals and ceremonies according to the jajmani system. They receive annual grants from their respective clients accordingly every year.

At Bet Dwarka, the ancient Vaishnavite temple of Krishna employs a Mir to play music during morning and evening Aratis — worshipping Fakir Muhammad Allia, Mir is the present musician of the temple. He is assisted by his son.

The Mirs in the recent years are trying to get better organized, but unfortunately they are departing from the syncretic lines in the process. They are trying to follow the paths of the Islamic Shariat and Quran. An organization formed by them in Wagher area specifies that should anyone deviate from the religious lines, they would be penalized. In the cultural domain as well, like in marriage ceremonies all non-Islamic rites and paraphernalia would be abolished. The Mir association has made it mandatory for the executive members to meet regularly after every three month unlike the past when the group used to meet once a year.





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### Ramdev Pir Following

The cult of Ramdev Pir is extremely popular over large areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan. The tradition is believed to have spread from fourteenth-fifteenth century. According to legends Ramdev Pir was a Tanwar Rajput. Enthoven suspects that Ramdev was one of the first Khoja missionaries who practiced teachings more Hindu than Musalman in order to secure following among Hindus. Mumtaz Ali (1994: 24-29) views that he had embraced Islam on the teachings of Pir Satgur Nur and that he had been deputed to stay among lower castes. He argues that *bhajans* of Ramdev possess strong resemblance with *ginans* composed by Ismaili Pirs. According to some quarters Ramdev Pir is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Krishna, Muslims venerate him as Ramsha Pir.

One of the beliefs associated with Ramdev Pir is that king Anangpal of the twelfth century had entrusted the administration of his kingdom to Prithviraj Chauhan (his maternal grandson) when going for a pilgrimage. Prithviraj refused to return the throne on his return. Anangpal and his associates then went and settled in Shiv tehsil of Jaisalmer. One of the disciples of Anangpal was a great devotee of Dwarkadesh (Lord Krishna). Because of his prayers Dwarkadesh decided to take birth as his son. This son was no other than Ramdev Pir. (Ref:<http://www.webindia123.com/rajasthan//festivals/fairs4.htm>)

Ramdev's cult is often called as *dhedo ka dev* — the God of the Pariahs. Presently, however, many people consider it to be a part of the Bhakti cult. Ramdev is considered to be an *avtar* of Vishnu-Krishna. But some devotees feel that his *Samadhi* — tomb, resembles a Muslim shrine. Many other graves surround his tomb at Runicha Pokhran. Foot-print stones, rag horses and clothes are regularly offered to the tomb stones by the devotees.

Ramdev is believed to have acquired the Pir title when he defeated five Muslim Pirs travelling from Mecca in a contest

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of miracles The Panch Pirs threw five tooth-brushes out of which five peepal trees grew up instantly. Ramdev Pir in response brought out five feeding bowls belonging to the pirs which they had left locked back at home. But many Muslims think that Ramdev Pir was a Muhammedan and his tomb has been taken over by Hindus.

According to many Ramdev was born to Ajmal Tanwar, a Rajput. After praying at the Krishna temple at Dwarka he was blessed with Ramdev — considered to be his own incarnation. He was not born normally as he was found lying in the cradle of his brother Viramdev. He started revealing miraculous powers right from the childhood. He slayed the demon Bhera and taught lessons to various people. He attracted many devotees from various castes around him. In the post-independence period many temples of Ramdev Pir have been constructed in different parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat and the cult has acquired almost the character of the Bhakti movement. But importantly it appears to be more popular among the Dalits.

One of the largest temples of Ramdev Pir is located at Vondh village in Bachau taluka of Kutch district. The temple is located about four kilometers away from the main settlement. It is placed right next to a highway.

The Ramdev temple of Vondh is quite an imposing structure. Almost the entire building is built of marble stones. It looks new and glossy. The temple is said to have been rebuilt after the big Gujarat earthquake a few years back. Within the main temple room there is only one image — that of Ramdev Pir — a bearded person saddled on a horse. Just by the side of the entrance an idol of Lord Ganesha too has been placed. Just outside, an idol of Lord Hanuman has been placed as well. By the side of it, a shrine of Dali Bai — a sister of Ramdev Pir too is to be found. On one side of the temple a number of green flags are found unfurled. The temple is importantly located on the land of a Hindu — Patel by caste. The *pujari* is a person (Babu Dhuiva Bhai) Darbar by caste. He is assisted by a Sevak — Rabari by caste.





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Scores of devotees visit the temple every day. But most of them are Hindus (mostly Dalits). Many Vaniyas (Jains) — Oswals, Patels and Darbars too frequent the shrine quite often. Many Muslims too visit it, particularly those who have undertaken vows (*Manta*) earlier and their desires have been fulfilled. A big fair is organized at the shrine during the annual *puja* starting on 11th of Bhadra (month). The fair continues for three days. Green flags or *Nejo* as locally called, are brought to the temple by many of the devotees from the adjoining villages.

The people of Vondh consider Ramdev Pir as belonging to the Toor caste and an *avtar* of Lord Krishna and born as a son of king Ajmal and his wife Minal Devi. It is reported that when king Ajmal of Bikaner visited Dwarka and took a plunge into the sea in the name of Lord Vishnu, he was blessed by a son who later turned out to be Ramdev Pir. Right from the childhood Ramdev revealed many miracles. As a small child he thrust his hands into a vessel full of very hot milk, but no harm was caused to him. Ramdev gave some clothes to a tailor to make a horse out of it. When the horse was ready, Ramdev sparked life into it and it started flying about. There is another popular myth about Ramdev Pir that when a demon in the forest was troubling the travellers, he went there and immediately gobbled up the tormentor.

Many other myths about Ramdev Pir are very popular in the village. According to one, once when Ramdev came across a Rabari shepherd grazing a tiny goat, he begged the owner to give him some milk of the goat. But the Rabari refused stating that the goat could not give any milk as it was still an infant. Hearing this, Ramdev through miracle made the goat produce milk.

Another legend suggests that once Ramdev enquired from a trader carrying sugar as to what he was trading and the person lied that he was possessing salt. This invited Ramdev's wrath and the whole sack of sugar turned into salt then and there. According to one more legend Ramdev Pir

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went to Anjar to meet Jaiswal Pir and begged for rest to a person Patel by caste. The Patel hosted him very dearly and provided him shelter under a neem tree in front of his house. Feeling glad, Ramdev gave him a boon by the virtue of which he became very wealthy and prosperous instantly. No wonder many Patels of Kutch area are staunch followers of Ramdev Pir.

A Dalit lady who longed for a daughter for quite long sought the blessings of Ramdev Pir. On meeting him, Ramdev Pir broke the branch of a tree (dal) and gave it to her. Within a short time the lady bore a girl who later acquired the name 'Dali bai' and began to be known as a sister of Ramdev Pir.

It is said that when Ramdev Pir was about to take *samadhi*, Dali Bai approached him and pleaded to be laid by his side. Ramdev accepted this and stated that she could do so if a comb and ribbon were to be found. Surprisingly these items were recovered from the spot and Dali Bai also took *samadhi* next to Ramdev Pir. Thus even now wherever a temple of Ramdev Pir is constructed a symbolical *samadhi* of Dali Bai too is built by the side of the entrance.

The presence of Ramdev temple has certainly added on to the syncretic tenor of Vondh village. The multi-ethnic village that it is (Of the 1400 households, 40 households are Muslim. Among the Muslims there are Ghanchis, Syeds, Majouti and Kumbhar, Khatri or calico printers), there are a number of temples and dargahs. The dargah of Samalshah Baba is one of the most prominent among them. It is about 670 years old. The annual *urs* is well attended by the Hindus and Muslims. Incidentally the dargah is placed right next to the temple of Jasubai Mata. The devotees visiting the temple also make it a point to pay their obeisance at the dargah. The village also has a small dargah of Jamilshah Baba by the side of the road. The annual *urs* of the dargah occurs at the same time as that of the famous dargah of Haji Pir in Kutch. Devotees going on foot to Haji Pir are offered food and rest at the shrine.

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The communal amity of Vondh village is also visible by the practices of many inter-community economic transactions. There are many Hindus and Muslims selling water from their fields to farmers of either community. There are several NGOs like UNNATI, Manav Kalyan Trust (MKT) and Action-Aid, which are operating in the village and running micro-credit finance programmes which have credit groups comprising of Hindu and Muslim members.

One must, however, pass the caveat that the inter-religious micro-credit group formations are a recent development as in many cases they have been formed at the instance of the government welfare departments or the NGOs funded internationally. Such groups do not structurally synthesize the Hindu and Muslim communities. In fact there are some cases where the composite groups are breaking down and unireligious micro-credit group formations are being encouraged. Even the international donor agencies are promoting this as they feel that this ensures greater participation, better efficiency and larger profits.

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**J.J. ROY BURMAN** (b.1955) is primarily an anthropologist having done his postgraduation from North Bengal University in Sociology and Social Anthropology. Immediately after obtaining the degree he worked on the impact of counter-insurgency among the Mizos in Mizoram as a Fellow of Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh. After living there in a village for about one year he joined Help Age India as Project Adviser for East and North-East India. After almost eight years of his direct contact with social work and social engineering, he joined Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, as a member of the Faculty. Apart from teaching Anthropology, Roy Burman also carries out research mainly on the problems in rural areas. Forests, environment, mass religion have been his main areas of interest. He is the first person in India to have done Ph.D. on Sacred Groves from the sociological perspective. Few anthropologists have had the opportunity to travel in the tribal and forest areas all over the country like him. Right now it has become his passion to portray the inter-ethnic harmonious relations in the country.

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